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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001691

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV ASEC SCUL GR

SUBJECT: ACTIONS OF POLICE, NOT PROTESTERS, CONDEMNED AFTER  
DESTRUCTIVE STUDENT DEMONSTRATION

REF: A. ATHENS 1663

1B. ATHENS 1556  
1C. ATHENS 1507

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following months of demonstrations over now-stalled reforms to Greek higher education, another angry protest on June 27 left parts of central Athens damaged, including the U.S.-affiliated Hellenic American Union and University. Focusing on protesters' rights, media and opposition parties condemned the riot police for use of excessive force and tear gas. As in this latest demonstration, Greek police still rarely arrest violent demonstrators (or infiltrating anarchists) who freely destroy property in Athens and Thessaloniki, then hide out in the safe-zone of university campuses. Although teachers and students have now suspended protests to take their summer holidays, we are concerned that protests, when they resume in the fall, might intentionally target U.S.-affiliated universities. END SUMMARY.

June 27 Student Protest Turns Violent

12. (U) Student protests continued on the streets of Athens June 27-29 over proposed legislation that would reform the Greek university system (Refs B, C). On June 27, an estimated 2000 protesters (8000 fewer than the previous week's crowd) marched into downtown Athens. Some in the crowd, including anarchist infiltrators, threw Molotov cocktails and clashed with Athens riot police. News footage showed cars burning, streets ablaze, and students, hooded anarchists, and police caught up in the fray. A bank, two stores, and five cars were reported damaged or destroyed.

13. (U) Riot police responded with teargas and, when the dust settled, five citizens and six police officers were injured, with just one student arrested. On June 28, a sworn administrative inquiry and police internal affairs investigation were ordered following charges made by a journalist that she was injured by riot police during the scuffle.

Hellenic American Union Building Attacked

14. (U) As reported Ref A, rioters also damaged the building which houses the Hellenic American Union and part of the Hellenic American University (both use the acronym HAU). HAU was until a few years ago the bi-national center, and remains strongly affiliated in the public mind to the U.S. Embassy. After attacking HAU, rioters barricaded themselves in the

safe-haven of the nearby Athens University law faculty building and set garbage dumpsters aflame. Central Athens roads were shut down for hours. (Note: The Hellenic American University, chartered in New Hampshire, is one university that would benefit from the part of the reform package that would allow and recognize private, non-profit universities. It is not clear to what extent rioters may have been motivated by their opposition to the potential recognition of HAU degrees, or by the fact that, after being diverted by police from one route, HAU was simply in their path. End Note.)

#### Opposition Parties Condemn Police

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15. (U) The main opposition PASOK party condemned the police for "not managing to contain the anarchists" and for "excessive" use of teargas against protesters. The pro-PASOK media berated the police for using excessive force against the hooded demonstrators. The Left Alliance party called the police response to the student demonstration "unprovoked" and "confrontational." The Greek Communist Party, KKE, criticized the police behavior and the "authoritarian attitude" of the New Democracy (ND) government in handling the student mobilizations. Without referring specifically to the protests, the Education Minister reiterated on June 28 at the OECD ministerial, "We all agree on one thing, regardless of the way one handles problems. That higher education needs very many changes."

#### Students Ready to Take Summer Break from Protests

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16. (U) Protests scheduled for Athens and the OECD ministerial (which was attended by Secretary of Education Spellings) had low turnouts on June 28 and 29. In Athens, no more than 200 demonstrators turned out for one of the last planned protests before students started their "summer break" from protesting. At the ministerial, which was moved to a suburb 40 miles south of Athens to avoid the demonstrators,

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busses transporting protesters were stopped by roadblocks and kept from reaching the hotel.

#### Students Don't Actually Know What They're Protesting

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17. (U) Polls results commissioned by Kathimerini newspaper and Skai Radio, reported by the press on June 29, showed that while 50 percent of Greeks polled said they "oppose" the reform package presented by the government (detailed in Ref B), 53 percent do not know the specific proposals included. Among college-aged Greeks (18-24 year olds) polled, 74 percent opposed the reforms, though 39 percent admit they were unaware of the actual proposals. When asked their opinion of specific proposals, such as time limits on acquiring degrees and recognition of privately funded universities the majority supported these changes.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Not uncommonly for Greece, public opinion has remained on the side of the demonstrators; nary a voice has condemned the violent protests or questioned why there are almost never arrests or convictions of destructive anarchists. The fact that there are mass demonstrations over reforms that most Greeks, even students, agree are necessary is most likely due to the government's inability to clearly and convincingly communicate the content of the reforms to the public. In fact, the draft text was not even released until late June, after months of protests had already taken place. When the Education Minister backed down from putting the reform package before Parliament on June 13, we saw that as a step backwards. The move left the government looking indecisive and weak, put them further behind schedule to enact EU-required reforms, and did not stop protests which continued for more than two weeks. While motivations of the attack on the Hellenic American Union/University are not clear, the action disturbs us. We are concerned that the anti-American climate of Athens could encourage anarchists to

stage deliberate attacks on HAU or other U.S.-affiliated universities in Athens.

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